Faith Is Something You Do
James 1:22-27, 2:14-17
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John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

"Faith is something you do." That proposition is found in the New Testament Epistle of James: "Be doers of the word and not hearers only...Faith without works is dead." That is to say, faith is not an emotion like love or hate: it is not something you have like brown hair, or a bad temper or indigestion, it is an activity. In fact, there is no faith that does not issue in particular and identifiable behavior. I should like to set that proposition in the context of one of the most consistent and biblically based theological commentaries in our culture - Charles Schulz's Peanuts cartoon. In an early segment Snoopy is shivering on a cold, snowy and windy day. He is the very picture of despondency and despair. Charlie Brown and Linus observe his plight from afar: bundled in warm coats, hoods, scarves, mittens and boots they trudge through the snow to help their friend. They offer curious assistance, however. "Be of good cheer," Charlie Brown says, rather pompously. And Linus echoes his sentiment, "Yes, Snoopy, be of good cheer." And off they go, leaving the dog perplexed, quizzical and just as miserably cold as he was before.

Both the author of the Epistle James in the first century, and Charles Schulz in the twentieth century are addressing the same issue - the glaring and distressing gap between faith and behavior; the notorious and inevitable distance between what people say they believe on the one hand, and the way they actually live on the other.

It is not, by any means, a new gap. It is not unique to us. In the Old Testament the prophets denounce it throughout the history of Israel. One of the earliest, Amos, roundly criticized the religion of his day because it had very little to do with the way life was lived. Religious ceremony and ritual were very popular: people believed the right beliefs and prayed the right prayers and observed the proper rubrics. But in the market place the merchants were cheating, the wealthy were ignoring the poor. Religion had no influence on behavior. And Amos thundered on God's behalf:

> "I hate, I despise your feasts,
> and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies...
> But let justice roll down like waters,
> and righteousness like an everflowing stream."
> Amos (5:21,24).

In the same way, the prophet Micah observed the gap between faith and life and wrote in a way we would describe today as "setting behavioral goals". "What does the Lord require of you?" he asked and then answered, "...do justice, love kindness and walk humbly." No matter what you believe in your head, the prophetic tradition warns us, what really matters is what you do and love and how you walk through life.

In the New Testament Jesus found himself constantly confronting the same gap. The Pharisees were very religious men: they knew the law and obeyed it. Yet sometimes it seemed as if their religion was what kept them from being kind and compassionate to those who needed kindness and compassion.

In the Middle Ages the gap continued between belief and behavior. The institutional church accumulated great wealth, doctrinal orthodoxy was preserved at all costs. Sometimes the cost included burning heretics at the stake, a regrettable practice, but altogether necessary to preserve the purity of the faith, they thought. And in the meantime the church showed very little interest in justice, mercy, humility - that is, in doing the faith.

And in our day both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism are guilty of silence and inactivity in Nazi Germany. The play, The Deputy, scored Pope Pius XII for doing little to oppose Nazi anti-Semitism. But the Protestant record is little better. German Protestants could worship the Father of all men and applaud the invasion of the Low Countries because the Reich needed Lebensraum (living space). Christian people believed the correct beliefs and ignored the mass executions of their Jewish neighbors. Just last Sunday, the Deacons of the First Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia, regardless of how harassed by the national press and other publicity seekers they felt, demonstrated that we have yet to do the faith in this country. By closing the doors of the church rather than admit a black person they have shown how easy it is to profess the Christian Faith - verbally - and deny it behaviorally.

While in Lafayette, Indiana, I came to know two men in the Sociology Department at Purdue. They were doing a research project on the social attitudes of religious people. I had lunch with them several times and kept running into them at meetings in the community: in particular, at something called "Project Commitment", a series of public events in which we wanted to accomplish, one, no less than the changing of attitudes between blacks and whites in the middle of the Civil Rights Movement; and two, the prompting of Christian people to behave like Christians. They were there, notebooks in hand, observing, questioning, measuring. I have just read the results in a remarkable and important article in Theology Today. The two scholars lament the fact that theology is done in a vacuum and whether the arena is the classroom or the church, theology never seems to get around to considering the real relationship between what people believe and their behavior patterns.

For a sociologist, human behavior is the only evidence there is. How people behave, to the sociologist, reveals what they believe, regardless of verbal affirmations. Don't tell a sociologist, for instance, that you are a Republican of Democrat unless you actually voted that way. The act tells what you are, not the sentiment or intent. In blunt language the article observes that: "The evidence quite consistently indicates that religious orthodoxy is either irrelevant to people's secular orientation, or it is associated with such orientations as ethnocentrism, prejudice, authoritarianism and an unwillingness to support social change." (Theology Today, January, 1976, p.34).

The authors suggest that in this culture many have never thought about orthodoxy in ethical terms and they ask, "Do beliefs in the Triune God, the incarnation, church, salvation, and particular doctrinal creeds have any relation to behavior, or are these elements relevant only to one's spiritual relationship with God?"

Enough of indicting. Why is it true? Why haven't we heeded our own prophetic traditions and done a better job of combining belief and behavior?

Part of the reason, I think, is imbedded deeply in the American character. To put it as simply as possible, we don't like anyone telling us what to do. We can't comprehend how the Germans submitted to fascism, nor do we understand the rigid behavior control of the Chinese form of Communism. The people who made a revolution in 1776 were only partially democratic by conviction. A lot of them simply couldn't get along with external authority: that is why they came here in the first place. In an excellent little volume, Politics, Poker and Piety, Wallace Fisher observes: "The American is a true child of the enlightenment, which stressed man's freedom from authority...Like his fellow citizen, the American churchman also loves his freedom. He is undisciplined, indisposed to accept authority...He is loath to accept any external standard of judgment upon his person, ideas or actions." (P.86-87).

Now, I am anything but critical of that. The obstinate refusal to submit to external authority is one of our better characteristics, I believe. And yet, it is a mixed blessing. Because it includes, I fear, a refusal to join the beliefs of our faith with our behavior. We are not comfortable with authority of any kind, even religious.

Part of the reason also, I believe, has to do with an inadequate understanding of our own theology. We Protestants, and particularly we Presbyterians, lean heavily on the theology of grace - the notion that God loves us apart from anything we do or refuse to do. We regard that as the Good News. Historically, we were born as a reaction to the shackling of God's grace by the church and its clergy. By the time of the Middle Ages, Faith had become something a person expressed by obeying the church. Salvation was for sale, frankly; available in direct ratio to the thoroughness with which a person conformed to the rules and rituals of the church. The Reformation was the rediscovery that it is free. Salvation is God's gift: people are saved not by what they do, but by reason of God's patient and never-ending love.

And so there is historic precedent for we Presbyterians digging in our heels when it sounds as if the church is telling us to do anything. We've been there before, and we know that as soon as we accept that, we will shortly be told that if we don't do what the church says, we will be doomed to hell. We value individual freedom, politically and religiously. And yet the result is not always very attractive. Years ago the late Adlai Stevenson wrote:

> "The United States has lost impetus and conviction because it has confused the free with the free and easy. If freedom means ease alone, if it means the shirking of the hard disciplines of learning, if it means evading the rigors and rewards of creative activity, if it means - worst of all - indifference or even contempt for all but athletic excellence, we may keep for a time the forms of society, but its spirit will be dead." (Cleveland Plain Dealer, 1/19/59; cited by Robert Rains in New Life in the Church, p.56).

If I may transpose that a bit, I would suggest that, in regard to our religion, we have done exactly what worried Adlai Stevenson. We have confused the free with the free and easy. In our anxiety to avoid authoritarianism in religion we have rejected all authority and all discipline. We may scorn the rigidity of traditional Roman Catholicism and quietly applaud its demise, but we have little if any evidence to demonstrate what we always held to be true; namely, that ours is an internal discipline. The plain fact is that all you have to do to stay in the church is appear every several years and contribute a few dollars. You may do either: it is not even necessary to do both.

That is why the Epistle of James is so very important. "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only...Faith without works is dead!" It almost didn't make it into the Canon of the New Testament. Martin Luther thought it should be removed: "An epistle of straw", he called it. Some scholars have suggested that it was actually written before Christ and squeezed into the New Testament by Jewish Christians who were more Jewish than Christian. It seems, at first glance, to be opposed to the Gospel of Grace by applauding the law and inferring that what a person does, how he or she behaves, is important in God's estimation. Taken to its extreme it could, I suppose, be used to defend a whole new religion of rules and regulations.

I prefer to value it as a balance, a guard against freedom becoming the synonym for free and easy. I prefer to regard it as a statement of the truth that being is doing, that we are who we are on the basis of the kind of life we live; that freedom which becomes anarchy is simply another form of slavery and that discipline is the door to the kind of freedom Jesus Christ offered.

Elton Trueblood writes: "It is easy for me to see that the disciplined pianist is far more free in his movement than I am: he is free to put his fingers on the right keys at the right time and I am not." (The Meditations of Elton Trueblood, p.14).

And a generation ago Whittaker Chambers astounded and frightened the American people by describing the level of discipline maintained in Communist cell groups in this country: members were absolutely forbidden to drink, all possessions were shared, they met weekly for study and all contributed ten percent of their wages to the cause. (Cited in Raines,op.cit., p.57).

Certainly part of the appeal of the fanatic new religious groups such as the "Moonies" and "Children of God" with young people is precisely at this point. A large percentage come from placid, middle class church homes in which religion meant little and demanded nothing. It should not surprise us that they find very appealing a movement that requires dedication and sacrifice. It should not be surprising that they find meaning in a religion that demands everything.

We define faith as a set of beliefs to which we conform intellectually. We regard faith as knowing the truth, believing the truth, reciting the truth as it is expressed in the Creeds and that's that. The people of the Old Testament wouldn't have had the slightest idea of what we were about.

Religion for the people of God in the Bible is not speculative theology but a way of living. The Purdue Sociologists observe: "To know God is not to conceptualize or define, but to live the faith with moral integrity...orthodoxy is more a way of life than a set of beliefs!" (op.cit. p.347).

Orthodoxy is a way of life...Faith is something you do. It is not, that is to say, something that you have, something that happens to you. If you are waiting to have it - you will wait a very long time. If you are hoping that one day it will happen to you in a miraculous moment of divine ecstasy and revelation, I would share with you my total skepticism. Faith, rather, is an active verb; a doing. No one knew that more clearly than Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who did his faith by helping to plan an attempt on Hitler's life. He wrote: "Do not say you have not got faith. You will not have it so long as you refuse to take the first step...Unless he obeys, a man cannot believe." (The Cost of Discipleship, p.6).

This is Stewardship Sunday. This afternoon people of this Church are going to visit one another for the purpose of talking about our life together as a congregation and the financial resources it will require next year. You may have wondered when the preacher was going to get around to money. I have, of course, been talking about money since the outset. Money, but more than that really. I have been talking about the Gospel of Jesus Christ and our response to it.

"Stewardship", someone once wrote, "is what I do after I say I believe." The timing is just a bit off in that sentiment. Stewardship is the only way there is to say "I believe". Faith without works is dead.

In the New Testament faith is no mere intellectual acceptance of the existence of God or the divinity of Christ. It is the self surrender of the individual to God: it is actively following Jesus Christ: a life lived: a discipleship accepted. And in the final analysis you and I need that far more than Broad Street Presbyterian Church needs our money. I have shared with some of you what Winburn Thomas - my mentor in Stewardship - once said. Thomas spent his life as a Presbyterian Missionary in the Far East. He was a courageous Christian whose wife had died tragically on the mission field. In later years he came back to work for our church in the area of Stewardship. "Ladies and Gentlemen," he would say, "if the only issue in Stewardship is money, raffle a Pontiac." He was right, of course. Because the issue in Stewardship is your Christian Faith and mine.

What we do with the resources at our disposal is part of it. Someone has suggested that the clearest statement of faith you will ever write is in the stubs of your checkbook. And anyone who feels that giving money to the church is unrelated to Christian discipleship simply hasn't read the New Testament. Jesus talked about money five times more than He talked about praying. We "do our faith" with our money. What we do with our time, our abilities, our skills is part of it. So is the measure of love with which we do our marrying and parenting, the kindness with which we do our neighboring and working, the justice and mercy with which we do our politicking. The entirety of our lives is the context in which we do our faith.

Jesus, one time told His disciples that His yoke was easy and His burden light. He did not say that there was no yoke and no burden at all. What I take His words to mean is this: He wants us to find authentic freedom - not the absence of rules and disciplines - but the freedom of following Him: He wants us to discover that we are never bigger and better people than when we are living out His invitation to love others more than we love ourselves: He wants us to know the fullness and peace of salvation, not simply by hearing about it - but by doing it - by learning in our own experience that it is far better to give than to receive. He wants us to know that His burden is light and His yoke fits easily, comfortably.

You have heard the words before: you know the promise. The invitation on Stewardship Sunday is to believe - by doing something about it. "Be doers of the word and not hearers only," is the way James put it.

Amen.

Our Father, forgive us when we neglect to live our faith. We would be doers and not hearers only. Be with all of our people this afternoon, that what is done might be pleasing in Your sight. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.